

Attacks On U.S. Forces May Persist

CIA, DIA Chiefs Warn of Afghan Insurgency Threat

By Walter Pincus, Washington Post Staff Writer

Senior Bush administration intelligence officials told Congress yesterday that U.S. forces in Afghanistan face increased danger of attack by pockets of al Qaeda and Taliban fighters that remain hidden in the country's mountains and cities.

Giving a stark portrait of the security climate faced by U.S. troops, CIA Director George J. Tenet and Vice Adm. Thomas R. Wilson, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, said that, despite the ouster of the Taliban last year, the return of warmer weather this spring will increase the likelihood of attacks against U.S. personnel.

"You're entering into another phase here that actually is more difficult because you're probably looking at smaller units who intend to really operate against you in a classic insurgency format," Tenet told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

The warning underscored the recent comments by U.S. commanders that the war is far from over, and signaled that the United States risks being drawn into a protracted guerrilla-style conflict. It helped explain Britain's announcement on Monday that it will send 1,700 Royal Marines to Afghanistan next month to join U.S. forces.

Testifying with Tenet, Wilson described "a very widespread probability of insurgency-type warfare" in Afghanistan's cities and rural areas. The al Qaeda and Taliban operations, Wilson said, "may bridge the difference between terrorism and . . . insurgent warfare, and that is what the military has to be prepared for."

Both officials said the United States has made significant progress against al Qaeda -- which is blamed for the Sept. 11 attacks in New York and Washington -- since the Bush administration launched the war five months ago. But they tempered their remarks with warnings that the threat posed by the militant network and by remnants of the Taliban government that sheltered it remains strong.

"The net situation [in Afghanistan] is a lot, lot better than it was, but we still have a long-term issue here," Tenet said.

The CIA director also noted that extreme economic, social and political problems remain in Afghanistan, including "ongoing power struggles" among the leaders of the country's predominant Pashtun community. Hamid Karzai, the U.S.-backed head of the interim government, "will have to play a delicate balancing game domestically," he said.

The testimony by Tenet and Wilson stand in marked contrast to comments made on Friday by Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, who said there was no "serious security problem" in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, a senior Pentagon official said that U.S. commanders are "leaning" toward releasing the 31 people detained on Monday in a raid on a suspected al Qaeda compound 40 miles west of Kandahar in southern Afghanistan. Preliminary indications are that they are not connected to either al Qaeda or the Taliban, the official said.

But Marine Maj. Ralph Mills, a spokesman for the U.S. Central Command in Tampa, said the 31 remain in U.S. custody. "We are still evaluating and interrogating, trying to determine who we have," Mills said.

Although he did not release any numbers, Tenet acknowledged that al Qaeda and Taliban fighters managed to elude U.S. forces during this month's offensive south of Gardez in eastern Afghanistan. "There are many, many points of exit that people in small numbers can get out," he said. "We're frustrated that people did get away."

Intelligence sources said that during Operation Anaconda, a Pakistani commander had left one section of the border open, apparently allowing some al Qaeda and Taliban forces to escape. U.S. commanders reported that hundreds of enemy fighters were killed in the assault, though some Afghan officials said the U.S. estimates are too high.

Tenet said the United States has asked the governments of Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which have allied themselves with Washington in the war, to deploy additional forces along their borders with Afghanistan. But he acknowledged that sealing the frontier will be extremely difficult. He said U.S. officials have asked the neighboring countries to at least monitor the borders more closely.

Tenet repeated U.S. charges that al Qaeda personnel had in recent months escaped across Afghanistan's 600-mile border with Iran and had traveled to other countries, and he criticized Iran for failing "to move decisively" against them.

Tenet also criticized Iran for its activities in Afghanistan, where Tehran's cooperation with the United States last fall in assembling the interim government is now "being eclipsed by Iranian efforts to undermine U.S. influence."

But Tenet drew a distinction between the actions of Iran's President Mohammad Khatami and its chief cleric, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who as supreme leader controls the Iranian military and security forces as well as the judiciary.

He said the clerical leadership "certainly doesn't like the fact that we've become the dominant player on the ground" in Afghanistan, adding that the change in attitude from the earlier cooperation with Washington "may indicate dramatically two faces of this government [in Iran] that we're dealing with all the time."

In the broader war on terrorism, Tenet repeated his earlier forecast that al Qaeda will continue to plan to attack targets in the United States and U.S. diplomatic and military

installations abroad. He said U.S. installations in the Middle East, Pakistan and Afghanistan are at particular risk.

He said that although there have been 1,300 arrests in 70 countries of "extremists believed to be associated with al Qaeda," the network "has not been destroyed."